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AUTHOR Davis, Vivian I.
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the characteristics and problems many language learning disabled (LLD) and dyslexic students have in college and suggests ways for college English composition teachers to help them. LLD students are often poor spellers and their handwriting looks like that of a younger child. Constant difficulty with certain grammatical transformations may also be clues of language learning disability. LLD students may have trouble with reading and may be incapable of getting meaning from certain words. Many LLD students also have problems in decoding the oral language and in communicating their own thoughts orally. Characteristics of the causes and conditions for dyslexia are discussed and three suggestions are offered for picking up clues about students who may be disabled. The teacher should first find out what LLD students need and what they have to offer and then find out how they can work with their fellow students most beneficially. Visual materials, rather than oral or written assignments, are suggested as being particularly effective for LLD students. (TS)

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Including The Language Learning Disabled Student in the College English Class

Vivian I. Davis

Texas Tech University
Lubbock, Texas

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Including The Language Learning Disabled Student In The College English Class

College English teachers know little or nothing of a group of students labeled dyslexic or language learning disabled (LLD). Though a small percentage of such students have always made it to college, heretofore, most of them have been channeled into vocational training or jobs after high school. Because of open admissions and the increased number of junior and community colleges, we are likely to see more LLD students in the college composition class. These students present a new challenge, particularly to college English teachers. There exists almost no literature about teaching the older LLD student. Most of what is known about dyslexics is generally limited to the elementary age level.

Presently, LLD students are almost entirely on their own in the college setting. Dr. Robert Cannell, Special Education professor, Texas Tech University, is particularly knowledgeable about the problems of college students who have difficulty with language related tasks. In his experience, these students often go unrecognized by their college teachers. Though some of them have tremendous strengths and have worked out their own coping skills, they do not get the kind of support and guidance from their teachers that could make the difference between success and failure. Cannell believes that educators in institutions of higher learning need to learn about LLD students and provide programs designed to meet their needs.

There is nothing about the physical appearance of LLD students which identifies them. They are usually of average or sometimes above average

intelligence. The English composition teacher would probably get the first clue to the identity of a student's language learning difficulties from the student's writing. LLD students are often poor spellers and their handwriting looks like that of the younger child. Constant difficulty with certain grammatical transformations may also be clues of language learning disability. Many LLD students adopt rigid writing habits. Their writing lacks variety in sentence patterns, word choice, and is often stylistically colorless. They have difficulty organizing material, and may find it difficult to understand the concept of controlling idea in a paper or paragraph. They may not easily develop arguments or organize thoughts into any logical pattern. While they may grasp a slogan or axiom, they are likely to be unable to support it with examples or to analyze it by comparison or analogy. They may be unable to develop implications or elaborations, to interpret or criticize, or to draw conclusions in their writing.

Besides having difficulty with writing, LLD students may also have trouble with reading. By the time they get to the college English class, most of them will have had some special training in reading. Since schools attempt to identify and "treat" them as effectively as possible, some of them will have had both individual and small group instruction from the elementary grades through high school. Often the student will have learned more about how to cope as a nonreader in the academic world, than about improving his ability to read. Some LLD students may be able to call words correctly, but are incapable of getting meaning from the words. Other LLD students may have difficulty understanding subordination, relationships as determined by prepositions, spatial and temporal relationships, or inferences, as they are encoded in print. Very often these students will complain of not being able to remember a thing they read, or of reading so slowly that they forget from one idea to the next. When they read silently, LLD students almost always move their lips, as they repeat each word to themselves, and

their eyes jerk back several times to words they have already read. They often cannot grasp contextual meaning. They may be more likely to concentrate on individual words--at times it appears that they concentrate on favorite or familiar words and ignore the context. Much of their reading behavior may occur as a result of the ways they have been taught to read.

Not only do LLD students experience difficulty with reading and writing, but many of them have problems decoding oral language and communicating their own thoughts orally. When I began this paper, I said to my sister, who is a special education teacher, "Why not simply let these kids listen to records and not worry about trying to teach them to read!" "That's assuming," she answered, "that they are able to learn through the aural channel." LLD students may appear to be carefully listening. They do hear, but between the ear and the brain something happens, or does not happen, that may render them unable to comprehend what is being said. They often try to listen for key familiar words or phrases; ask to have statements or questions repeated, or respond with confused behavior. They may find it nearly impossible to put together the words that create the abstractions by which they can communicate their own ideas orally; to develop and support logical arguments, to explain temporal and spatial relationships, or to reason from cause to effect. In classroom discussions, they may seem never to talk on the subject, to repeat pat meaningless phrases, to speak in non-sequitors and to be unable to support their ideas with examples or facts, or any line of reasoning. Teachers must remember, however, that all of the problems cited here are also characteristic of unskilled students who may only need to learn how to use language effectively. On the other hand, the behaviors mentioned are always signals for further investigation.

The language skills problems I have just mentioned are, of course, only clues. They cannot be taken as "symptoms" of language learning disability. Students' themselves should never be labeled, and their learning deficiencies

should not be categorized without careful investigation into their learning backgrounds. The tendency to label students and thereby oftentimes to rationalize the school's teaching failures, is discussed by Frank W. Freshour in an "Elementary English" article. Freshour says that experts have calculated that the percentage of dyslexics varies from one-tenth to forty percent of all students. The reason the percentage varies so widely is that the definition of dyslexia, or language learning disability, is very subjective (Freshour, Sept., 1973, p. 864). Whatever their actual numbers, a large proportion of students considered dyslexic or language learning disabled are poor, male, minority or ethnic group members, and those whose behavior is unacceptable in the classroom setting. Freshour says that we could cure dyslexia by doing away with the term. He believes that labeling the student's problems may satisfy the school and the parents, but at the expense of stigmatizing the student. It is the student who is considered deficient in some way, or stigmatized as having some mental or physical disability which makes it impossible for him to learn. Nonetheless, college language teachers must recognize LLD students before they can develop programs for them.

No specific cause or causes for dyslexia have been isolated, though it is known that the condition may result from lesions on the brain which may be congenital or acquired in an accident or stroke. Donald G. Doehring cites a number of conditions which may cause dyslexia: defective visual perception because of failure of the left brain to develop (some believe because of failure to establish hemispheric dominance); directional confusion, or difficulty distinguishing left from right; neurochemical factors including disturbance of synaptic transmission which involves abnormal functions of the two neurochemicals, acetyl choline and cholinesterase; disturbances in visual-motor functioning; difficulty synthesizing visual images; difficulty distinguishing figure and ground; prenatal or perinatal injury to the nervous

system; and high fever caused by disease (Doehring, 1968, pp. 7-12). Doehring admits that it is not yet determined how these disorders interfere with reading. Research does show, however, that many students, who have difficulty with language related tasks, though normal in every respect, are more often than other students distinguishable by one or more of the conditions cited by Doehring.

We know too that dyslexia is not primarily a visual or aural deficiency. Most of us can comprehend through the neural channels of vision, hearing and tactility. We are able to grasp stimuli through all three neural channels, from which the stimuli travel to the brain where they are decoded, analyzed and synthesized. The dyslexic person may be unable to grasp stimuli through one, two, or all of the neural channels, but he may be unable to send along the stimuli to the brain through one or more of the channels, or, his brain may be unable to decode or analyze or synthesize stimuli coming through one or more of the neural channels. In other words, dyslexia or language learning disability, involves neurological factors rather than intellectual ones. It is much more complicated than faulty vision or poor hearing, and is therefore not likely to be "corrected" with glasses or a hearing aid or phonics. Research into this condition is at its infancy. We need much more information about how to teach language skills to students who either lack certain neurological abilities or whose neurological functions differ from those of most people. Statistics do not show whether the number of the language learning disabled has increased, for we have only recently become aware of the problem. Ironically, the use of drugs, antibiotics and even environmental pollution could be taking their subtle tolls by increasing neurological dysfunction in our population.

But LLD students cannot wait for further research to pursue higher education. These students presently attend college classes, and some of them experience their most difficulty in English composition courses. What can

the teacher do? LLD students are usually sensitive about revealing their difficulties, for they have often been stigmatized as retarded and "treated" in remedial classes before coming to college. The teacher should be both tactful and perceptive and should hold in confidence any personal information learned about a student. The teacher's first problem may be to identify LLD students in the English class. I suggest three methods teachers might use to get clues quickly about students who may have language learning disabilities. The teacher may develop a simple data sheet to be filled in by each student on the first day of class. The data sheet should be not more than one page long, designed to reveal pertinent information about the backgrounds of all students, and to indicate those who have problems with language related tasks. Some sample questions to be included are: Do you have visual problems? Have glasses ever been prescribed for you? Do you wear glasses now? Have you ever had difficulty in reading or writing? Do you wear a hearing aid? Have you ever worn a hearing aid? Have you even been in a special (reading, writing, English) class? Have you ever flunked English though you did your best? Are you a slow reader? Can you remember what you have read? Do you have difficulty passing tests? Do you receive your best grades in: writing, reading, spelling? Are you good at writing down exactly what you mean to say? Do you have difficulty with words that sound alike or look alike?

The data sheet should also ask students to give their names, addresses, phone numbers, age, sex, number of years they attended school and a history of communicable diseases including scarlet fever, diptheria, pneumonia, TB, and meningitis as well as any handicaps they may have. All questions should be read aloud and explained to the entire class before the students begin to fill out the sheet.

The information on the data sheet will not pinpoint dyslexia or language learning disability, but it will provide strong clues for further investigation.

If, for example, a student reports receiving the lowest grades in reading, writing and spelling, having difficulty with vision though a doctor never prescribed glasses, and a history of scarlet fever, the teacher ought to suspect that further investigation is in order. The student's high school records and college entrance records may indicate the need for appropriate testing to determine if that student may have language learning difficulties. Of course, testing presents yet another problem. I was unable to find a psycholinquistic test actually designed for the adult student.

Teachers may arrange to have all students complete a short writing assignment, about one page, during an early class meeting as a second way of finding out if some students may need special help. A conference should be arranged for the teacher to discuss each student's paper with him. I suggest holding the conferences during the class time in order to get to every student. (The class should be engaged in some self-directed activity while the conferences take place). The writing sample would give the teacher an opportunity to find out what students are having writing problems which <u>may</u> be associated with language learning disability. During the conference, the teacher may glean a good bit of information about each student's background and problems in English classes. The information may suggest that the teacher should investigate further by reviewing the students' high school records and college entrance tests. If indicated, appropriate testing should be arranged.

A third technique for finding out about students is an oral approach. The teacher may set up a tape recorder in the office or a corner of the classroom set aside privately. Each student would be asked to go to the tape recorder and tell the teacher about his experiences in special language classes, about problems related to learning language skills, or any information which would allow the teacher to help him. This may probably be the most difficult way to gather clues, but some students who write very poorly

are better able to compose orally. This method, as the other two, is only a way of gathering enough clues to find out what students may need special help. Investigation into high school records, testing, and perhaps conferences with a psychological counselor who has expertise in the field may all be required before the teacher can be certain that some students have language learning disabilities.

Once the teacher is sure that a student has some language learning disability, there may not be a great deal that he knows how to do in the classroom. Obviously, English departments must begin to cooperate with psychologists and neurologists who can help us develop the most effective methods for diagnosing and teaching LLD students. In the meantime, we are faced with students whom we must teach now. To begin with, I'd like to give the teacher a list of things NOT to do: 1) Do not attempt to teach the student to read eventhough he may ask you to do so. Most college English teachers are not qualified reading teachers, and do not have the skills for teaching reading to LLD students. Very likely the student has been given special instructions in reading before he got to college. His problems are not simply that he doesn't know phonics or that he doesn't see every word. If the average college English teacher attempts to teach the LLD student to read, he is likely to spend a great deal of time and energy, reap little result and raise the level of frustration for both himself and his student. 2) Do not send the student off indiscriminately to remedial English. Remedial English classes in most colleges are not designed to meet the needs of dyslexic students. The English teacher should make sure that the remedial English class to which he is sending his student can benefit him, or he is likely to send the student to another experience in failure. The student will be segregated from his peers, singled out again and convinced once more that he is too stupid to learn. 3) Do not embarrass the student in the classroom by making public examples of his errors or by asking him to perform some task,

such as reading aloud, which he cannot do. 4) Do not allow the student to trade on your need to be a good person or a sensitive teacher. The LLD student must be expected to achieve, to do his work and to put forth extra effort to succeed. 5) Do not gear your class and teaching-learning activities exclusively to print media. Reading and writing are not the only media by which students learn. It has been demonstrated time and again that all of the language arts skills reinforce one another. Furthermore, we know that concepts are learned from reading, writing, acting, listening and visual observation. In the college English class, as in language classes from kindergarten on, equal opportunity should be given for the development of all the language skills--listening, talking, reading and writing. Shuman R. Baird writes:

> Many teachers view print as the medium for learning rather than a medium for learning. It would be absurd to minimize the importance of reading as a medium for learning, but it is wasteful and futile to assign it such importance. Psychologists tell us that we know half of all that we are ever likely to know by the time we are four years old, yet most of us do not learn to read until two or three years after that. And after one becomes a competent reader, he still gains more of his knowledge from non-print sources (Baird, Shuman R., "Illinois Schools Journal," 1973 p. 56).

Though Baird refers to high school students, he makes an essential point. Though the abilities to communicate orally and to decode the spoken word are the most basic competences required both within and outside of academe, college English classes are almost exclusively geared to reading and writing. This rigid insistence on reading and writing as the only valid ways to learn fosters our insensitivity to the abilities of LLD students, and it has to be overcome before alternative programs can be developed. Given current attitudes, it would be considered radical to propose the possibility of college English curricula in which non-print media might be the principle teaching-learning tools.

The teacher, having been given so many dont's, may justificably wonder just what to do with LLD students. These students are a challenge in the

college classroom, but they can produce. Most of them, have developed some skills for coping in the academic world of print media though they have difficulty. They often have a high level of determination and are usually able to stick to an objective though progress is slow. Fortunately, the majority of them who get to college, have developed some skills at reading and writing. Freshour suggests that the teacher carefully assess the student's strengths and weakness and plan an individualized program for him. He refers to elementary students, but his advice is good at the college level also. Some students who have difficulty at reading and writing have worked out their own coping skills. Help may be simply a matter of the teacher understanding and arranging to allow the student to work in his own way. For example, a student who reads poorly may be able to do much better if he is provided a vocabulary list or a summary outline before he begins reading the material. Perhaps he may need someone to discuss the reading material with him before he reads it so he will anticipate what he should read for. He may need another discussion after the reading to make sure that he found the essential ideas and understood the relationships between them. Perhaps the student with reading difficulty needs an adapted version of the text or a particular piece of literature. The teacher may help him find such materials as well as recordings--many have been developed for the blind. Fellow students may be willing to create the kinds of materials the student with reading problems could best use. (Rewriting literary materials for easier readability could be a useful and creative way for able students to practice writing skills). It is often not difficult to get students to help each other. James Moffett suggests that small groups be a "staple" in all language arts teaching. Peers should always be encouraged to learn from each other, and the more diverse the group, the better (Moffett, 1968, pp. 93-94). The teacher should find out what the LLD student needs and what he has to offer, and then find out how he can work with his fellow students most beneficially. Students

will often voluntarily organize study groups or discussion groups if they are encouraged to do so. It may also be possible to arrange to provide LLD students with editors for writing. Moffett believes that the small group can be especially helpful to all students with editing and rewriting. Students who are training to become English teachers could benefit from experiences working with LLD students. Ruchlis, discussing younger children, reports that peer-tutoring relationships are important to both the tutor and the tutored. The disabilities of LLD students, including those in college, are often intensified because they do not have peer relationships. A helping relationship begun in the English class could become a valuable friendship. The cooperation model in teaching the language arts is certainly more appropriate in the college classroom, for students can learn from each other and because learning is reinforced by teaching. Language arts skills are best developed when students can play teacher roles as well as learner roles.

The LLD student should be allowed to bring a tape recorder to class if he has difficulty writing notes, and if absolutely necessary, he should have a reader as blind students now have. The reader could be a student in his own class. (All readings should be taped so that the student would be able to review for tests and so that copies of the tapes could be available in a listening station or to other individual students who would need them). The student could take tests or do composition assignments orally on tape. This would require his having the assignments and test questions available to him on tape. It would also mean that the student would have to learn the techniques of developing good oral compositions. Like the student who composes in print, he would be required to revise his taped compositions for organization; for the development of a main idea supported by evidence or examples; for the use of transitions to move from one idea to the next; for diction and style, etc. The first taping would be done, and presented to a small group of students who would listen to it and make suggestions for revision. The

student would then attend a conference with the teacher who would make any additional suggestions from which the student would edit and polish the oral composition. Some students, more skilled in the production of films, slides, or filmstrips, might do projects in the visual media rather than oral or written assignments. Such projects would not only be evidence of the student's ability to synthesize what he is learning, but useful additions to his own class and to a listening station where they would be available to other students.

Baird suggests that nonreading students "can be exposed to the same essential range of ideas that one finds in good literature through systematic and sensibly viewing of films." He believes that much reading can be replaced by film study. English classes should make much more use of films for all students. There is too often a feeling that films are only an entertainment medium--not useful in the classroom. Films may add new dimensions to the exploration of literary compositions. The use of films as a way to communicate literature, makes it possible for students who have difficulty reading to acquire information so that they can particpate in and benefit from class discussions. They can then, remain with their peers and feel that they are constructively contributing to the class.

We need to explore the possibilities of tapes and recordings in teaching college English. At one time, I wrote off the whole idea of learning a language from recordings, and I thought the notion of learning from a tape recording while asleep was a comical fraud. While I continue to have serious reservations about how recordings can be used effectively in one's sleep, research might open up the area of the use of tapes and recordings as teaching devices to us. I am challenged by what a student who has difficulty with reading told me about how he has learned to dream what he reads or hears in class as a way of "fixing" ideas and materials in "my brain." I cannot speak for the efficacy of dream therapy in teaching English, but we must not

assume that we already know enough about how to teach language. We must be open to a much broader field of exploration into the mysteries of the human brain. Referring to high school students, Baird believes that the school should continue attempting to teach the nonreader how to read, but in the meantime should "be working to expose him to the full gamut of non-print media available and should be doing everything in its power to involve him in mature thinking." Certainly colleges should do likewise.

As composition teachers, we have often been looked on as purveyors of certain skills which were believed requisite for success in higher education. Without much ado, we have accepted the criticisms of other departments who blame us if students do not know how to study, how to read and write, or how to discuss or debate. It is now time for English Departments to involve other disciplines in developing facilities, teaching materials and diagnostic tools which will benefit that group of college students who have difficulty learning from print media. Baird suggests that high schools should provide listening stations for students who have difficulty reading. The listening station would be functional for college students as well. Most colleges and universities have media centers in their libraries. Those centers could relatively easily be expanded into listening stations. The stations should be equipped with video tape players, cassette tape players, movie and slide projectors, and phonographs. Also available in the station should be appropriate audio-visual materials. The listening station should be arranged to accomodate small groups of listeners, individual listeners, and entire classes. As much as possible materials should be available on loan, much as books are, and it should be possible to place materials on reserve as necessary. Though hardware itself would never circulate, it should always be available to students during the school hours and library hours. The station should be staffed by an appropriately trained librarian and student aides who would check materials in and out; operate the machinery, and keep it in good working

order. Such a station could be as simple or as elaborate as funds would allow. Each department would be responsible for making its materials available in the listening station. The materials would include taped textbooks, periodicals and pamphlets as they become available. Surely publishers will produce more and more non-print material as it gains status as teaching-learning material worthy of use in the college classroom. A large amount of material geared to audio and visual neural comprehension is currently available and tactile materials are being developed.

In a very large university, the English Department might maintain a small listening station of its own. In the large urban center, several schools might develop a listening station between them. It might also be feasable to develop mobile listening stations which would be available on a rotating basis to schools in small isolated communities. With a resource such as the listening station, all students, but particularly nonreading students, would have an alternative for acquiring information, and we may learn a great deal about developing true multi-media language courses. Listening stations would provide a different kind of resource for research--wouldn't it be exciting to be able to hear a tape recording of Shakespeare done during the Elizabethan age.

English Departments must now become involved in the kind of research which will provide us with diagnostic tools and teaching methods appropriate to LLD students. Knowledge of these students and the best ways of teaching them can only improve the effectiveness of what we do with all students in college composition. We can no longer think of dyslexia merely as word blindness or reading difficulty, or as a problem to be remedied by teaching phonics. LLD students have different neurological patterns, and therefore cannot be expected to respond to more of the same thing we give the other students. No one would expect a color blind person to learn to discriminate between colors by constantly being exposed to color wheels. We must take

the initiative in developing interdisciplinary research teams who will gather data, perform experiments and go through the arduous scientific process necessary to provide us with the information we need to train teachers who can effectively teach the LLD student. In other words, we must take seriously the right of the language learning disabled student to pursue higher education, and then find ways to help him develop to the limit of his potential. To do otherwise is to support a kind of elitism by the way we teach the language arts in institutions of higher learning.

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